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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4229
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001140

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/13/2017
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SUBJECT: AHMADINEJAD VISITS ALGIERS

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (U) SUMMARY: Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad's August 6-7 visit to Algiers generated significant noise, but apparently little of substance. The press, responding to a pre-visit public relations effort by the Iranian embassy here, obligingly described the Ahmadinejad visit as part the "rapid evolution in the process of the normalization of relations" between Algeria and Iran, which split in the 1990s over Iran's support for Islamic extremists in Algeria. Key issues reported from the visit included Iran's nuclear program, international terrorism and economic relations. By the end of the visit, Algeria and Iran had signed four minor bilateral cooperation agreements on housing, legal, cultural and aviation issues. The foreign ministry declined to meet with us to discuss the visit. End Summary.

THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

12. (U) Ahmadinejad's visited Algiers for about 36 hours August 6-7 in what was described as a return visit for President Bouteflika's 2003 trip to Tehran. Although the Iranian embassy here tried to play down the issue, Iran's nuclear program dominated print media coverage, with most papers describing in detail the country's difficulties with the international community on the issue. Ahmadinejad told the press that Iran would continue to pursue peaceful nuclear technology and thanked Algeria for its "steady support." According to one European diplomat, in a luncheon speech the Iranian also departed from his prepared text and said that Iran was ready to help Algeria develop its own nuclear potential. For his part, Bouteflika used the visit to restate Algeria's position that a peaceful nuclear technology program is a right for signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, calling anything else "inadmissible".

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

13. (U) In an August 6 press conference, Ahmadinejad described international terrorism as a "negative phenomenon." He added, however, that "certain states" had distanced themselves from "human and spiritual values" and were participating in and promoting international terrorism for their own interests. He also implied that terrorism might be justified as the sole means of countering American and Zionist aggression in Iraq. Ahmadinejad took pains to praise Algeria for maintaining its relations with Iran in the face of the isolation efforts of the "Great Satan" (a term that at least one reporter suggested he used ironically). The local reporters pounded Ahmadinejad on Iran's decision to withdraw recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic after a

visit by the Moroccan king to Iran in 2006. He responded with general language about Iran's desire to see the Western Sahara conflict resolved through dialogue.

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

14. (U) Algeria and Iran have an economic relationship described by at least one newspaper as "modest," with bilateral trade between the two countries last year totaling only \$7 million, according to the Iranian ambassador in Algiers. Several newspapers wrote of Iran's desire to improve the economic relationship, noted Ahmadinejad's support for a cartel of gas-producing countries, and highlighted Iranian interest in the Algerian market, particularly the automobile and banking sectors. Ahmadinejad also spoke publicly of Iran's eagerness to work in Iran with the Algerian oil parastatal Sonatrach. Nonetheless, little of real economic substance appears to have emerged from the visit. According to the papers, Algeria and Iran signed four documents as a result of the visit: an "executive program" for 2007-09 for cooperation between the respective ministries of housing; a proces-verbal ratifying a cultural cooperation agreement signed in 2002; another proces-verbal bringing into force a criminal justice cooperation agreement signed in 2003; and an agreement on "aerial services." Separately, Iran Khodro Industrial Group signed an agreement with the Algerian government to study opening a truck assembly factory in Algeria. Khodro's subsidiary, SAPCO, talked to the Algerians about opening a spare parts factory. No announcement about the establishment of air links between here and Tehran was forthcoming, despite suggestions prior to the visit that flights might soon start.

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15. (U) At the formal lunch given August 7 in Ahmadinejad's honor, President Bouteflika gave a speech in which he highlighted advances in Iran's science and technology programs, spoke of Algeria's positive investment climate and called on Iran to help Algeria in its attempts to assist the Palestinian and Lebanese people. Bouteflika added that the fight against terrorism should include a strategy to combat misery and the ever-growing inequality that it bred.

THE MEDIA, TOO

16. (U) Editorial coverage of the visit varied slightly in content but was mostly cautious. The French-language daily Liberte wrote that Algeria had taken a realist view of its relationship with Iran, reminding readers that Iran, like Sudan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, had attempted to export its version of Islam to Algeria. L'Expression continued that theme, highlighting the differences between conservative Iran and (by comparison) free-spirited Algeria. In contrast, an editorial in the small French-language daily La Nouvelle Republique titled "Iran is not a threat" maintained that Iran's nuclear program would "rebalance the power relationship by rendering the Israeli nuclear threat in the region inoperative" and said that UK and U.S. interests were served by maintaining ethnic divisions in the Middle East.

COMMENT

17. (C) It was not lost on the Algerian public that Ahmadinejad was using the visit as part of his larger effort to cultivate moderate Muslim friends in order to end his country's international isolation. Nonetheless, most Algerians do not seem to have forgotten Iran's public support for Islamic extremists here in the 1990s, and enthusiasm for Ahmadinejad's twice-postponed visit was limited.

Bouteflika's creaky non-aligned foreign policy means the welcome mat is more or less permanently out for the likes of Ahmadinejad, but the sense of welcome has its limits. The Algerians were open to economic overtures from Iran, but showed little interest in reciprocating. We also have the impression that the visit may have been curtailed: the Iranian ambassador, the foreign ministry and the press all spoke ahead of time about an August 6-8 visit, but in the end Ahmadinejad left the evening of August 7. Since the foreign ministry is refusing to talk to us about the visit, however, we're having difficulty verifying that.

DAUGHTON